DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 972 CS 008 589

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TITLE "The Mozart of Psychology": "Mind in Society" by L. S. Vygotsky: Implications for Improving Literacy.
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Reading; *Child Development; Child Language; Child Psychology; Communication Skills; Developmental Psychology; Developmental Stages; Imagination; Language Acquisition; *Learning Processes; *Learning Theories; Play; Pretend Play; Reading Research; Research Needs; *Social Cognition; Social Development; Speech Communication; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship; Verbal Development; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Vygotsky (Lev S)

ABSTRACT

L. S. Vygotsky's book "Mind in Society" was published more than 50 years ago in Russia, but it is now being recognized as relevant to contemporary research in child development because of the areas of investigation that he suggested. Vygotsky views children as active participants in their own learning and suggests that researchers analyze processes, reveal causes, reconstruct points of development, and study responses to teaching. He sees the developmental process as lagging behind the learning process; therefore, it should be the concern of research to show how external information becomes internalized. Vygotsky also examines the link between play and socialization. For him, imagination is play without action, but in play the rules are determined by the child's ideas, not by the object. He also finds connections between play and language development. While developing speech, children free themselves from immediate environmental constraints. They can plan, order, and control themselves and others. Speech organizes and unifies disparate aspects of behavior, such as perception, memory, and problem solving. "Writing," which follows next, "must be relevant to life," insists Vygotsky. By helping children "write" through making marks and pictures in kindergarten, allowing them gradually to develop skill and also maintain enthusiasm because they find their writing efforts relevant, educators could improve literacy substantially. (NKA)

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"The Mozart of Psychology"

Mind in Society by L. S. Vygotsky: Implications for Improving Literacy

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I am a fourth grade teacher at Prospect School in East Cleveland, Ohio, and a doctoral candidate studying literacy and instruction at Kent State University. I have had articles published in the Ohio Reading Teacher (July 1984) and The Reading Teacher (February 1985 and one in process).

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Reading Mind in Society gives one hope that educators will become more realistic about children. There will be concepts which make our dialogue with students more effective. The student-teacher ratio will come down. There will be tools for assessing potential ability and developing it. There will be time, space, equipment, and encouragement for incorporating imaginative play into our lesson plans. Children will start to write in preschool and kindergarten, and gradually, naturally become comfortable with this formal means of self-expression. There will be better techniques for helping children master disciplines, better ways to teach how we comprehend and analyze what we read, how we use mathematical concepts, and how we remember. Surely educators will begin to use Vygotsky's ideas.

A look at the title page is sobering. Vygotsky wrote these chapters in Russia in the 1920s and early '30s. Fifty years have passed. The revolution did not occur.

The only review I found of Mind in Society (of the two listed in the book review indexes of 1978 to '80) was in the September 28, 1978, New York Review of Books, titled "The Mozart of Psychology." In it Stephen Toulmin tells us that Harvard Press published Mind in Society because it is relevant to contemporary research. He explains why we took so long to recognize Vygotsky's significance: Because our

psychological research has been organized differently from Russia's. He explains why Vygotsky's work is valuable to us: Because he suggested "fruitful lines of investigation." Toulman relates that Stalin labeled Vygotsky a "non-person" because, while "Stalin insisted that all phenomena were 'culturally conditioned' and so amenable to technological (behaviorist) transformation, [Vygotsky] sought to reintegrate the supposedly separate sources of 'natural' and 'cultural' phenomena." (p. 51)

Why has so little attention been paid to Vygotsky's theories?

Vygotsky's idea that "All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals" (p. 57) may seem too idealistic or its implications too expensive. "Actual relations" take time. The old refrain from most educational administrators I know is, "Class size makes no difference to teacher effectiveness."

Vygotsky discusses studies of "mediated memory" developed through interactions between children and adults. Adults, who have more highly developed memory skills, teach these skills to children. Vygotsky asserts that "the lack of recognition among educators of this social process, of the many ways in which an experienced learner can share his knowledge with a less advanced learner, limits the intellectual

development of many students." (p. 126 "Afterword," by Vera John-Steiner and Ellen Souberman) Awareness of this concept was first communicated to me by a University of Illinois professor, P. D. Pearson, speaking at The Ohio Reading Teachers convention at Kent State University a few years ago. Referring to reading comprehension rather than memory, Pearson outlined a process by which the teacher models all the steps being taught, and then gradually, in stages, asks the students to perform independently, first one step, then two, then three, until the students are doing it all. During stage one, for example, (step 1) the teacher reads a passage out loud, (step 2) the teacher thinks out loud about what questions he might ask about the passage, (step 3) the teacher reads selectively out loud looking for answers, and then, (step 4) the teacher supplies the answer, and finally, (step 5) the teacher supplies evidence to support the answer chosen. The next stage would be for the teacher to model every step except for supplying the answer. During the last stage, the students perform all the steps on their own. I took this idea back to first grade and have been using it ever since. Having watched me model the process, children are eager and able to imitate me. This helps the children more than any other technique I know to build skill at reading comprehension. Yet I have not heard nor read of the technique being widely used. Vygotsky has not been "discovered" by

textbook publishers and curriculum writers.

Vygotsky's view of development as a complex "intertwining" of internal and external factors (including signs and tools) and "adaptive processes" may be too Russian, too comprehensive, or too complicated for our scholars studying education. In 1984 E. E. Maccoby, president of The Society for Research in Child Development, complained that "Divergent paths have been taken by research in cognitive development and research in social-emotional development. Cognitive studies have dealt primarily with normative developmental change, while studies of social behavior in children have focused on individual differences and the socialization factors that bring them about." ("Socialization and Developmental Change," Child Development, April 1984, p. 317)

Maccoby alludes to one of the few articles about Vygotsky's approach, "From Social Interaction to Higher Psychological Processes: A Clarification and Application of Vygotsky's Theory," by James V. Wertsch (Human Development, 1979, 22). Wertsch offers an explanation of why it has taken so long for Vygotsky's ideas to influence educators. When Thought and Language was published in English in 1962, poor translation created a fundamental misconception. What Vygotsky meant as "speech" the translators called "language." Thought and Language should be Thought and Speech. People

thought Vygotsky was focusing on language per se rather than on how language is used in human interaction. Another difficulty has been, according to Wertsch, that our research about speech is begun after children start to speak. Vygotsky's analysis begins with earlier communication.

Wertsch describes an experiment illustrating "how the child begins to learn to participate in a communicative context." (p. 10) Step by step, the child's definition of the situation becomes more like the adult's, until finally the child is able to complete a new, fairly difficult task independently. Numbers are not important here, although they are used. The detailed description, however, is instructive. First, though he is participating in the language game, the child's understanding of it is different than the adult's. Soon the child takes in the adult's definitions; now the adult need only give feedback. Finally the child takes over, telling himself, out loud, what he should be doing. P. D. Pearson was probably influenced by Wertsch's experiment.

Frank Smith, in Reading Without Nonsense (Published by Teacher's College, Columbia University in 1985) refers to Vygotsky and describes the same concept. Parents, Smith writes, "give children the information they need to develop language themselves." A child tests a hypothesis, "The past tense of go follows the regular rule; by saying, 'Daddy

goed.' And the parent provides the relevant feedback by saying, 'Yes--Daddy went.'" (p. 86 & 87)

Vygotsky's view of children as active participants in their own learning has contemporary adherents, including Maccoby who says we now recognize that learning influences flow back and forth between teacher and child. However, many educators are attracted to direct instruction and programmed learning techniques which posit a one-way information flow that strictly limits student input into the learning process. Pearson's modeling of comprehension asks students to think for themselves. Direct instruction and programmed learning require memorization, not independent thought.

Vygotsky suggests that researchers analyze processes, reveal causes, reconstruct points of development, study responses to teaching. This could give teachers tools and guidelines. Maccoby echoes Vygotsky when she writes that much work must be done to find "the keys to a child's receptiveness" (p. 327), to find out what makes children able to comply.

Vygotsky believes we need to know the "zone of proximal development" (p. 91), what children are capable of with help, as well as the "actual developmental level," what they can do independently. This concept influenced some recent reading theorists who recommended testing a child's independent, instructional, frustration, and potential levels with an

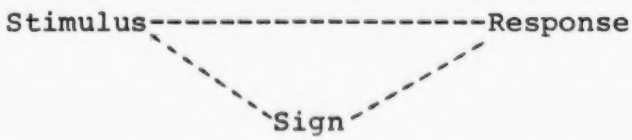
I. R. I., a teacher-made Individualized Reading Inventory. In the article, "Brave New World of Intelligence Testing" (Psychology Today, September 1979), Berkeley Rice, citing Vygotsky, describes a test to measure potential by noting how many prompts a child needs to solve unfamiliar problems. Teachers have neither the mandate nor the tools to assess potential.

Vygotsky writes that he differs from Piaget and Binet, who assume individual development occurs before learning can take place. He differs from Thorndike and Skinner, who see learning and development as occurring simultaneously, with learning independent of developmental level. He differs from Gestaltists, who see development as "a larger set than learning." (p. 82) Instead, he sees the developmental process lagging behind the learning process. Therefore, he says, it is the concern of research to show how external information becomes internalized. Research is needed in each school subject so that we will know how to present the material in ways that will facilitate development. To progress into "the zone of proximal development" we need to analyze internal growth processes stimulated by teaching and needed for subsequent learning. Teaching is the means through which maturation is advanced. We have to focus on emerging functions and capabilities. To bring these ideas

to the point of practical application, we have a long way to go; moreover, we need to study them in the classroom.

Like Piaget, Vygotsky studied children by watching them deal with problems. Piaget did it to describe and analyze the child's developmental stage. Vygotsky did it to describe and analyze the teaching-learning dialogue. Vygotsky observed that in solving the difficult problem of finding keys on a piano keyboard, a child made many impulsive movements. When helpful signs were supplied, the child's movement became more direct. The signs, he concludes, restructure the psychological process and allow the child to master the movement. Beginning with Kohler, he tells us, "scholars have noted that the ability or inability to direct one's attention is an essential determinant of the success or failure of any practical operation." Speech extends the time field for action forward and backward. What emerges is intentions and symbolic representations of purposeful action, social motives (what K. Lewin termed "quasi-needs"). "The child's emotional thrust is shifted from a preoccupation with the outcome to the nature of the solution..." He is beginning to act voluntarily. "Voluntary activity," Vygotsky writes, "more than highly developed intellect, distinguishes humans from animals." (p. 35-37)

Vygotsky discusses how signs serve to extend memory.



A sign serves as an auxiliary stimulus which allows for self-control. Potential for sign use, Vygotsky says, exists at the earliest stages. "Transitional systems lie between the biologically given and the culturally acquired...(this is)...the natural history of the sign." (p. 46) Vygotsky conceptualizes the way language functions with inborn factors during the socialization process: "The individual elements in a visual field are simultaneously perceived...(but)... speech requires sequential processing. Because each element is separately labeled and then connected in a sentence structure, speech is essentially analytical." (p. 33) Maccoby, mentioning Vygotsky, discusses this concept using the term "cognitive executive processes." She finds implications in this discussion for teaching students how to plan for themselves to solve given problems, how to become more efficient in using what they remember, how to become more self-monitoring. Tools for teaching are implied in this analysis, but they have yet to be developed.

Vygotsky analyzes the connection between play and socialization. His description suggests the importance of play. He writes that, at the point at which the gap between

desire and fulfillment widens, a child begins to enter a new imaginary world in which wishes come true. Imagination is play without action. Vygotsky quotes K. Lewin, "Things dictate to a child." For example, a staircase is to be climbed. (p. 97) But in play the rules are determined by the child's ideas, not by the object. "A child's greatest self-control occurs in play," Vygotsky says. "A child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality." (p. 99) Play leads development.

Rousseau, Froeble, Montessori, Piaget, Erikson, many believe in the importance of play. But schools have been shying away from play. We find more and more formal "skill" lessons in preschool and kindergarten. Could we be imposing a Puritan work ethic on three to six year olds? Meanwhile, television takes up much time at home. A colleague of mine, also a long-time first grade teacher, believes this is why children seem less captivated by first grade than they used to be. If we gave, as Maccoby suggests, "more attention to diagnosing children's state of readiness for a given socialization input and take into account the skills and motivation the child has for either resisting or cooperating with a parent or teacher" (p. 137) we would create more opportunities for play, not fewer.

Vygotsky analyzes the connection between play and language development. He finds in play "the prehistory of written language." Gesture is the initial visual sign, "writing on air." (p. 107) Scribbles are gestures; drawings also. Children don't draw, Vygotsky says, "they indicate." In play things symbolize other things. So play is speech. Vygotsky describes studies using objects as symbols in play with three year olds. They remembered that, for example, a book represented a house. While developing speech, children free themselves from immediate environmental constraints. They can plan, order, control themselves and others. Speech organizes and unifies disparate aspects of behavior, such as perception, memory, and problem solving.

Writing follows speech. Vygotsky explains, "The child must discover that the lines he makes can signify something." (p. 113) A study by Alexander Luria, Vygotsky reports, found children of three and four writing by using marks, then retelling their stories. Certain marks had certain meanings. In such studies two sorts of symbols were identified: "first order symbols" denoting objects or actions, and "second order symbols" denoting words. "Written language becomes direct symbolism that is perceived in the same way as spoken language." Vygotsky concludes that "it would be natural to transfer the teaching of writing to preschool years." He

criticizes Montessori, who did have young children write, because he found the children doing "mechanical exercises." He offers an example: "Happy Easter to Engineer Talini and Headmistress Montessori. Best wishes to the director, the teacher and to Dr. Montessori, Children's House, Via Campania." (p. 117) "Writing must be relevant to life," Vygotsky insists. By helping children "write" through marks and pictures in kindergarten, allowing them to write a great deal in every grade, and enabling them to gradually develop skill and also maintain enthusiasm because they find their writing efforts relevant, we could improve literacy substantially.

Today there is a network of educators teaching what they call "the writing process" to children beginning in preschool and going up through the grades. Kent State University (Richard and J. L. Vacca) recently followed the University of New Hampshire and the University of Iowa in developing such a program. But the number of public schools involved actively in instituting writing programs relevant to daily life is still too small to make any substantial inroad into the large subliteracy problem in our society.

Vygotsky associates language development and moral development with social interaction. This does not happen in front of a T.V. set or in a large group of children. It happens during communication between adult and child.

The relationship between the individual and society is dialectical. Conversation is essential, Vygotsky explains. "Every function in a child's cultural development appears twice on two levels. First on the social level, and later on the psychological level; first between people...and then inside the child. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. The actual relations between human beings underlie all higher functions." (p. 57)

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